

The Ijo Society Through History: Analysing the Impact of Oil on Culture and Community

Iti Orugbani

*Department of History and
Diplomacy,
Niger Delta University,
Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State*

Article DOI:

10.48028/iiprds/ijsrhlir.v8.i1.02

Keywords:

Ijo people, Niger Delta, socio-cultural practices, political structures, oil exploration, cultural preservation, economic transformation

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the traditional structures of Ijo society before the advent of oil and to assess the significant changes that have occurred since. It employs a qualitative methodology that includes historical analysis and ethnographic observations. The findings reveal that prior to oil exploration, Ijoland had robust family structures, and traditional governance systems rooted in gerontocracy. The Ijo language serves as a crucial identifier for community members, while marriage customs—such as small and big dowry marriages—highlight the importance of kinship and gender roles within their culture. However, the discovery and exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta have led to profound socio-economic transformations. The influx of wealth has resulted in both positive developments, such as improved infrastructure and education, but negative consequences, including environmental degradation and social unrest, drown out the positive impacts. The findings highlight the complexities of Ijo identity shaped by historical transformations driven by external economic forces, and places emphasis on the need for cultural preservation amidst rapid change and highlights the role of traditional governance structures in navigating contemporary challenges. This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how resource exploitation affects indigenous communities and their cultural heritage in Nigeria's diverse ethnic landscape.

Corresponding Author:

Iti Orugbani

Background to the Study

The Ijo people, also referred to as the Ijaw, represent a significant cultural and linguistic group in Nigeria, being the fourth largest ethnic community in the country (Ukeje & Adebani, 2008). They constitute a unique linguistic and cultural group located at the heart of the Niger Delta region. As one of the over 300 ethnic groups in the country, the Ijo has a unique history marked by transformations arising from broad societal development through time as well as the influence of oil industry activities (Obi, 2001). They are the dominant ethnic group in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, accounting for a bulk of the oil wealth that sustains the Nigerian economy (Obi, 2001). They have thus, been key players in agitations for developmental attention directed at the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies in the region. In view of this, an attempt is provided in this paper to offer a deep understanding of the transformations experienced in Ijo land through history.

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of various facets of Ijo society before and after oil, to show the socio-cultural, economic and political structures that existed before oil and the changes that have followed. In discussing the traditional Ijo society, it provides details on the Ijo language and its dialectal variations across communities. Then it proceeds to lay out the family structures, marriage customs and traditional beliefs surrounding kinship and gender roles. Next, the political structures and governance systems within Ijo communities are analysed, highlighting the transition from traditional leadership roles to more democratic frameworks influenced by European colonization. These insights into the traditional patterns in Ijo society is followed by an analysis of the transformative impact of oil and how these have manifested across diverse spheres, both positively and negatively.

In pursuit of identified objectives, the paper employs a qualitative methodology that includes historical analysis and ethnographic observations. The structure of this paper is organized into distinct themes that facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter under study. These themes are in two broad categories – the Ijo society before and after oil. Beginning with an overview of the historical context of the Ijo people, the paper progresses to an examination of their language and dialects, followed by an exploration of their social organization and marriage customs. The analysis will culminate in a discussion of their traditional economy and political systems and the impact of oil. This serves not only to illuminate the complexities of Ijo identity but also emphasizes the impact of oil-induced economic transformations and the broader implications for cultural preservation.

The Ijo Society: Language and Culture

The Ijo people, also known as the Ijaw, constitute the fourth-largest ethnic group in Nigeria. Historically, the Ijo had extensive interactions, particularly during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequent forest product trade (Abejide, 2012). The term "Ijaw" is a colonial variation of "Ijo," used interchangeably since colonial times. In 1932, P. Amaury Talbot described the Ijo as inhabiting a 250-mile coastal stretch between the

Ibibio and Yoruba territories (cited in Alagua & Clark, 2009). The Ijo language and customs are distinct from those of their neighbours, and no historical evidence suggests the Ijo resided outside their current mangrove-region habitats.

The Ijo language serves as a marker of identity for the Ijo nation. Linguists classify it within the Niger-Congo language family, specifically the Ijoid branch, alongside Defaka. The Ijoid family is further divided into East Ijo and West Ijo language clusters. East Ijo includes dialects spoken in Rivers and Bayelsa States, such as Kalabari, Kirike (Okrika), Ibani, Nkoro, Nembe, and Akaha. Nembe is spoken in communities like Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri, while Akaha is used in towns like Akassa, Oginibiri, and Sangana. West Ijo comprises Inland Ijo dialects, spoken exclusively in Bayelsa State, including Biseni, Akita (Okordia), and Oruma, and Izon, the largest dialect group. Izon, central to the Ijo linguistic landscape, spans Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, and Ondo States. Professor Kay Williamson classified Izon into Northern Central and South-Central dialects. Northern Central dialects include Kolokuma/Opokuma, Gbaran, Ekpetiana, Operemo, Kou, Tuomo, and Tarakiri, among others. South Central dialects encompass Bumo, Oporomo, Oyakiri, and Koluama. The Defaka language, a minor branch of the Ijoid family, is spoken by a small community in Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area of Rivers State (Alagua & Clark, 2009).

In addition, the Ijo-speaking areas are home to other Niger-Congo languages. For example, in Bayelsa State, the Central Delta language cluster, such as Ogbia, forms a group of mutually intelligible dialects. Similarly, the Delta Edoid languages, including Epie-Atisa, Zarama, Degema, and Egene (Engenni), are spoken across Bayelsa and Rivers States. Southwestern Edoid languages, such as Isoko and Urhobo, are found in Bayelsa and Delta States. Despite this linguistic diversity, the term "Ijaw" has been frequently misconstrued, leading to ambiguity regarding membership in Ijo-speaking communities and organisations such as the Ijaw National Congress (INC) and Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC). While the Ijo people are distributed across several states, including Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, and Ondo, not all residents of these areas belong to the Ijo nation (Alagua & Clark, 2009).

For the Ijo speaking people, as with other societies, the family is the smallest unit of society. The structure of an Ijo settlement has the nuclear family, extended family and the lineage ward. Polygamy was practised and highly revered by the Ijo society. This was, among other things, due to the traditional economy of farming, fishing, and trading, which required mass labour for sufficient production. An interviewee noted that monogamy was disregarded and seen as an epitome of laziness on the side of the man. In the traditional Ijo society, a man's dignity was measured by the number of wives and children he had before the consideration of physical structures like house or other forms of property.

The marriage institution was highly upheld. There were mostly two types of marriages - small and big dowry marriages. The small dowry marriage was the simplest and cost

effective. In this system, a man could go to his intended wife's family with his family members and friends to pay the bride wealth with comparably lesser pecuniary implication. Marriages contracted in this type did not allow the groom to have full ownership of the wife and children from the bride's family. However, when the big dowry system was applied, the wife including the offspring would become bona fide members of the husband's family. The children could now traditionally have the fully legal standing to inherit property from their father's family. Even at the death of the wife, the corpse would be buried at the husband's family land.

Except Nembe, all Ijo groups in the Niger Delta practised patrilineal system of kinship. Nembe has been a matrilineal society; and while the big dowry system of marriage was in vogue with other Ijo groups, it was not contracted with a Nembe woman. Among the Nembe-Ijo, only the men were allowed to marry outside the Nembe-Ibe (clan) through the big dowry marriage. But the Nembe custom did not allow a woman to be taken away through the big dowry marriage either with an indigene or non-indigene. In the Nembe society, the children from big dowry marriage alone could claim total inheritance of the father's property. Being a matrilineal society, children belong to their mother in several ways. In Nembe society, the maternal family was recognized as the bona fide owner of children. Even children's property is inherited by the mother's family at their death.

Generally, incest was frowned upon; mostly in Nembe, children mistakenly got through incest could die without attaining puberty, though when certain sacrifices were made - *soutugubi* - to appease the ancestors, the children could be free of the imminent death. Premarital sex was discouraged and extramarital sex by women was regarded as sacrilege. Sex on rivers, bush and bare floor was forbidden and regarded as a heinous offence. When such offence was committed to desecrate cultural property, sacrifice also had to be made to cleanse the river, bush or land which had been so defiled. If this was not done, in the case of rivers certain fish resource, especially the sardine fish would not appear in its season for fishermen to catch. In the farming areas, arable land might cease or lose its fertility. For instance, in 1998, the sardine fish ceased to display in its normal period. It was later found that the river had been desecrated by two strangers from Calabar by having sex inside their canoe while on the river. Commenting on the issue, an interviewee asserted that when the priests were consulted and sacrifices were made, the river brought forth the sardine fish that year.

Politically, Ijo groups in the Niger Delta rule themselves under a political structure of various cadres performing specific functions. Originally, among the western Ijo groups, the chief priest of the clan god *pere/orukaraowe* was the political head of the clan. Meanwhile, at the various village's gerontocracy was practiced. The eldest man *Ama-okusuowe* and a cabinet of other eldest men representing different families conducted political /judicial affairs over a village.

However, consequent upon the advent of the Europeans and subsequent colonization of the area, the traditional political structures had more democratic structures, hence, house

of elders emerged. This was the highest body with the king *Amananaowe* presiding over meetings. Matters under such meetings, among other things, included making of by-laws relating to marriage and adultery; acquisition and management of communal land, settlement of intra-communal land disputes; religious rites and festivals, etc. Below this council was the community council *Amadibu* (Okaba, 2013). This council had representatives from various lineage quarters – wards - to discuss matters affecting the community such as theft, rape, tenancy, education, general community development, etc. This body usually had an elected chairman and other functionaries by simple majority vote. Membership strength was usually above fifteen with age consideration of a minimum of 15 years. At the various quarters also existed an executive council of about seven persons nominated by the lineage assembly. The main duty of this council was to liaise with the superior organs such as the house of elders and the community council for the day to day administration of the community. This body could also make by-laws peculiar to the lineage group so far as such by-laws did not contravene those of the highest bodies.

Youth association also existed. They acted as the police of modern days. Their main functions were to assist in the implementation of by-laws, penalties, resolutions, levy collections, farm boundary adjustments and general sanitation. During inter-communal clashes, the youth also had a major role to play. The functions of the youths seem to be the same in every part of the Ijo society. The structure of the political organs was somewhat different in the Eastern Ijo group. In the Eastern Delta Ijo, the king (*Amayanabo*) has the highest political power in the community. Next to him was the chieftaincy council. The chieftaincy council was a conglomeration of various chiefs from different ward *Polo* in the community. The highest decisions were taken in the *amayanabo* in council, that is, the king and the chiefs' council meeting which was presided over by the king. The council of chiefs' executive members could serve two years and could be re-elected for another two-year term. The next political organ was the various chieftaincy houses. They administered their members. Membership of a war canoe house was by birth or through other means such as slavery, pawning, and conquest. Each war canoe house had a head and subsidiary chief, representing lineage groups. Inter-family disputes were settled by the chiefs and elders of the house.

Generally, in Ijoland, administration of justice was done by almost all political, socio-cultural and religious organs depending on the degree of disputes and the parties involved in a conflict. Minor disputes were mostly settled at the family level of chieftaincy house. Dispute involving inter family affairs could be taken to other bodies. The king's palace served as the highest human judicial body. In the eastern Delta, some cultural dance clubs such as *sekiapu* served as a judicial body too. The national gods, deities or oracles also served in the administration of justice. Many a time, contending parties could consult a particular soothsayer or deity to bring justice in disputes by revealing, punishing or killing the offender. Crimes were also checked by the intervention of deities. Some deities when invoked could kill as many as possible until they were appeased by the people. For instance, in 1973, at Obiata community a man's palm oil was stolen.

Nobody came out to apologize to the owner when the matter was noticed by the community. The owner of the palm oil later consulted a deity called *sebiriekine* in order to fish out the people that stole his oil. Oral tradition reveals that *sebiriekine* in response to its invocation was said to have killed so many Obiata people who were directly or indirectly had knowledge about the stolen oil. The remnant of the community latter discovered the mystery of the carnage and appeased *sebiriekine* the dieity to calm. Till this day, no one could hide a stolen property at the mention of *sebiriekine* in obiata and communities within the area. The ravaging powers of the *sebiriekine* reduced to some extent the rate of theft in the area.

Cultural associations and festivals also featured prominently in the traditional society of the Ijo groups in the Niger Delta. During festive periods or on the demise of a member of a cultural club, masquerades were displayed and spectators came from far and near to watch several styles of masquerade display. Headpieces usually represented scary reptiles, predatory fish and menacing water monsters which were found within the region. In the Eastern Ijo, the *sekiapu* cultural club was very popular among other masquerade clubs. There were two kinds and sizes of *sekiapu* cultural club - *kala sekiapu* and *opu sekiapu*. The latter enjoyed more admiration from the people than the former. All these clubs had a set of masquerades to entertain the community. Membership of these cultural clubs was voluntary with no age consideration.

Festivals of different sorts were observed in Ijoland. There was a plethora of historic festivals in Ijoland, prominent among them were *Okpotu Bagi* among the Kolokuma, *Seigbein* festival among communities in Kumbo, Gbarau and Odoni. In Nembe, *Isemi Olali* and *Idumangi* festivals were the most revered. These festivals were faithfully observed in an interval of not less than 15 years. These cultural activities served recreational roles in the various communities. Most of the festivals were also observed in honour of departed heroic ancestors or in commemoration of historic events. For instance, the *Burufebai* festival was set aside for communion with the ancestral spirits and divinities that were revered for their roles in agricultural productivity (Okaba, 2013). This annual festival of the fresh water Ijo communities was prominent in among the Gbaran, Opokuma and Tarakiri. The Odi annual festival was marked in commemoration of the historic killing of a buffalo that had terrorized the Odi community for many years.

The Traditional Ijo Economy

The Ijo people's traditional economy was heavily influenced by their environment, with farming being a major part of their livelihood. The fresh water belt provided abundant arable agricultural land, making farming more suitable for practice in areas within the fresh water zone. Staple crops such as cassava, cocoyam plantain/banana, sugar cane, and maize were commonly grown in these areas, making farming very encouraging for both men and women. The freshwater vegetation in Ijoland also supported the natural growth of economic trees, including raffia palm and oil palm trees (Alagoa & Clark, 2009). These trees generated diverse economic activities in the traditional environment of the Ijo people. The availability of raffia palm led to the local gin distillation industry, especially

in the Izon speaking areas located within the fresh water zone. Local palm wine tappers produced traditional gin called *kaikai*, which involved both men and women. Raffia palm fronds were used for producing thatches, mats, fans, baskets, and hats, with women mostly engaging in thatches making ventures. Fishing was also done with the fruit of raffia palm, with a particular kind of raffia palm fruit being used for fishing. Fishermen sometimes used scoop nets or spears to kill the poisoned fishes.

Palm oil production required several stages of process, with palm fruit bunches being cut down from the tree and transferred to a local depot for separation. The fruit could be removed from the bunch in two ways: keeping them in a shaded place for 6 to 7 days, or leaving them in a hard form for 3 to 4 days. The fruit was then boiled to soften in a big container, then put into a large carved wooden trough for men to match with leg until pulp-like mixture was produced. Oil palm also had various economic functions, such as manipulating its fronds to make home utensils like brooms and dirt packers. The palm kernel from the oil palm was of great importance to the local people, as it was edible and used to produce local palm kernel oil called *izan* in Nembe. *Izan* is medicinal and used to cure various illnesses, including typhoid fever, malaria, earache, and exorcising evil spirits.

Canoe carving was another industry that thrived in the tradition economy, providing transportation in both fresh water and mangrove swamps. Fishing in the fresh water environment was mostly done on the river and on natural and human-dug ponds in the forest. The canoe making industry was a significant part of the traditional economy of the Ijo people in the Niger Delta region. The fresh water vegetation in the region provided ample opportunities for canoe carving, with sub-Ijo groups like Arogbo, Olodiana, Egbema, and Furupagha being major manufacturers and suppliers to other Ijo groups within the Niger Delta. Hunting was another source of livelihood, with various methods and techniques adopted by hunters.

Fishing and farming were the main sources of livelihood in Ijoland. Fishing was done in both the fresh water and mangrove zones, but it was the main traditional occupation of the sub-Ijo groups found in the salt water areas. Most Ijo groups in the Eastern Niger Delta are located in mangrove swamps, which led to the establishment of fishing settlements along rivers or seas. These settlements included Idama in Kalabari, Sangapiring, Indatiri, and Younkiri in Nembe. Several types of fishing were practiced, with the type and size of fish sought dictating the kind of technique and gear applied by fishermen. Net, hook, and line of different sizes were the main fishing gears, with hook No 5 being suitable for big fish like skippers and shinenose, and No 18 for fish with very little mouth such as mullet and tilapia. Some fishing came seasonal, with the sardine fish being particularly important.

Salt making was also a significant aspect of the traditional economy of the Ijo in the Niger Delta region. Salt making was exclusively an occupation for the mangrove/littoral communities, with the eastern Ijo communities being particularly pronounced in this salt

boiling occupation. Local practitioners boiled salt water with aerial roots of mangrove to produce large quantities of salt. One known salt boiling center in the Nembe area was Kalangabugo along the Santababara River. Trading also constituted a part of the traditional economy of the Ijo in the Niger Delta region. Salt and dry fish constituted major trade items of the eastern Ijo groups and other salt water sub-Ijo clans in the Niger Delta. They exchanged their commodities for agricultural produce, first with their fresh-water sub-Ijo groups and then with their hinterland neighbors in what came to be known as long distance trade. For example, the Eastern Niger Delta Ijo groups of Okirika, Bonny, Elemkakabari, and Nembe and other salt-water Ijo groups such as Akassa, Bassan, and others received most of their canoe supplies from the fresh water west-Ijo groups of the Niger Delta. In turn, these fresh water sub groups received salt and fish from their salt water counterparts. Ijo groups also traded with the mainland people of Urhobo, Isoko, and Edo for specialist goods such as bronze and clay pots, which they desperately needed even for the salt making industry. Hinterland communities such as Ogbia, Engene, Ikwere, Ndoki, and Ogoni had commercial dealings with the sub-Ijo groups in the Eastern Niger Delta. Nembe people in the Eastern Niger Delta traveled far distance to Aboh where they also exchanged for goats, dogs, yams, and other forest goods.

The Transformative Role of Oil on the Ijaw Society

The discovery of oil has been variously described to have come with mixed blessings to the country. In his book, *The Niger Delta and Oil Politics*, Ekpo (2009), contended that oil production has brought good fortune as well as curse in Nigeria. He postulated that crude oil production has been a mixed bag of fortune and misfortune, blessings and curses, depending on who is receiving what effect. To him, oil production has engendered huge fortune for the country. However, he lamented that for the oil-bearing communities, oil has been more of a curse than a blessing; that “deforestation, erosion and destroyed farmlands, as well as pollution, among others are cost of oil production” (Ekpo 2009, p. 29). To clearly map the transformative impacts of oil on the study area, this paper proceeds to draw from evidence to discuss the adverse as well as positive impacts of oil industry activities on the study area as well as their transformative impacts.

Oil and the Ijaw Economy

The traditional economy of Ijo, Nigeria, primarily focuses on fishing and farming, but has experienced significant deterioration due to the advent of the oil industry. People grew common crops and vegetables such as plantain, cassava, cocoyam, okra, and pepper (Williamson, 1970; Ariye, 2013). Also, big trees were felled for lumbering and canoe-carving, while others engaged in hunting and capturing animals such as antelope, porcupine, monkey, bush pig, grass cutter, iguana, and alligator, among (Olali, 2023). Palm oil was also produced by gathering a quantity of palm fruit. The raffia palm was tapped for local gin (wuru) (Ariye, 2013; Olali, 2023). These were among the major occupations that existed in the forest industry. However, after years of oil exploration and production in the area, certain deleterious events associated with oil production emerged and negatively impacted the forest economy. The economy is severely threatened by oil industry activities and the attendant issues of pollution arising mainly from oil spillages.

Oil spillage is the greatest single environmental threat connected with the exploitation of petroleum resources in Nigeria, with Nigeria recording more cases of oil spills than any other oil-producing country (Okaba, 2005). Between 1982 and 1992, Nigeria's contribution to SPDC's total worldwide oil spills was 40%, while SPDC's oil production in the country accounts for only about 14% of Shell's total worldwide oil production (Ikporukpo, 2011). Oil pollution is a frequent occurrence in the Ijo territory, with an average of one oil spill occurring every week (Okaba, 2005; Ikporukpo, 2011). Over 95% of the volume of oil spilled in the area was not recovered, causing a major source of environmental degradation and causing the scarcity of fish in the environment (Atuama, 2010). Mangrove swamps are particularly vulnerable to crude oil spills, as they bear oil traps and retain spilled oil for a long period. There have been no methods for quick or satisfactory clean-up of spills in the mangrove swamps, and the extent of damage depends on the toxicity of the oil.

Oil pollution became a daily phenomenon in the Ijo environment, coupled with explosives released during seismic operations, the intermittent oil blow-outs have destroyed a large degree of aquatic life. Pollution has also led to the exodus of fish away from the Ijo territorial waters. The scarcity of sardine in the eastern Ijo communities is a great pointer to the fact that oil pollution threatens the existence of aquatic life (Akagbue, *et al.* 2024). Sardine fishing was usually attributed to the majority of fishermen in the salt water zone, but an oil spillage occurred on Santababara River in 1992, leading to the sudden disappearance of the fish species on the river (Sakaeva, 2022). This has driven a sizable number of fishermen to alternative sources of living, resulting in a steady decline of the fishing economy.

Another oil-related cause of the shrinkage of the fishing economy has been traced to the oil politics in the Ijo communities. In making this point, an interviewee noted that almost all the able young men in the fishing economy have deserted their occupation for 'oil-youth politics', where they negotiate with oil companies for casual employments. In 2000, salaries/wages for youths were between N30,000.00 and N40,000.00 per month. From 2010, wages of these temporary oil workers increased to between N60,000.00 and N90,000.00. In recent times, the massive involvement of the youths in illegal oil bunkering has led to the near collapse of the fishing industry.

Land alienation is a notable problem inseparable from the oil activities in Ijoland. Oil installations usually cover a sizable space of land, which is not suitable for farming. Most oil facilities are sited on arable agricultural land, causing economic havoc to the people (Feghabo, 2014). Oil blow-out has also remained a big blow on the forest-based economy, leading to soil quality impairment and poor crop production. When oil spills occur on a farmland, they contaminate the top soil, rendering the top soil unsuitable for plant growth due to reduced availability of soil nutrients or the introduction of toxic contents into the soil. The thermal effect of gas flaring sites also causes poor crop yields from farmlands. An interviewee made this point in an assertion that farms closer to gas flare sites generate poor harvest compared to those at a far distance.

Oil activities are also blamed for the exodus of a variety of wild-life from oil-producing areas. During the seismic phase of oil exploration, explosive devices are used in the technology of the oil prospecting corporations, scaring them away from their traditional immediate environment to long distant places (Okotie, 2018). Spilled oil on the bush endangers the ecosystem, killing several kinds of creatures, especially small creeping ones, which are prey to other wildlife (Akani, *et al.* 2022). The scarcity of these prey leads to the scarcity of the animals that usually feed on such creatures. This has resulted in the exodus of animals that were originally identified with a particular environment.

Another significant effect of oil exploration and exploitation on the economic environment of Ijoland is the issue of indiscriminate felling of economic trees such as mango, palm oil, raffia palm, mahogany, and more (Adeyemo, Ubiogoro & Adedeji, 2009). In the exploration stage of the oil industry, seismic companies map and clear survey lines, destroying all economic trees and crops within a given space where oil facilities would be installed (Adeyemo, Ubiogoro & Adedeji, 2009). This destruction severely affected the activities of palm fruit gatherers, leading to the renouncement of traditional jobs. An interviewee from Bayelsa State pointed out that compensation for oil-related damage in is usually calculated almost exclusively in relation to damage to economic crops or fishing grounds or gear and was paltry compared to the value of resources lost to oil spillage or exploration operations.

Socio-political and Cultural Transformations

The socio-cultural environment of the Ijo people has been significantly impacted by the advent of oil companies. The production of oil has led to negative developments in the area where oil is extracted, including the socio-politico-cultural sector (Okotie, *et al.* 2018). From this study, it was found that the destruction and destruction of sacred places and shrines have become a common phenomenon during seismic jobs. The Egenelugu and Ikensi communities have been particularly affected by these negative developments. In 1990, several sacred or forbidden places were inadvertently desecrated and destroyed by oil workers during seismic operations in the Nembe environment. Ofonimunuma Seipri and Egene-Pogu were defiled by oil workers, who were believed to have divine powers and were consulted for spiritual problems. The Enemu oracle, which was believed to possess divine powers, was also believed to have been instrumental in the non-existence of the divine powers of the deity.

The Ikensi community also suffered from the desecration of a sacred portion of land belonging to a powerful god, Akurobo, during the 1990s seismic operations. This sacred forest was called Akurobo piri, and humans were forbidden to step foot on it. Oil workers habitually walked through, destroyed, and desecrated the forest, making the once sacred land a free zone. No spiritual power is believed to have been manifesting there any longer. A native of Odioama, Elder Williams Okolo, lamented the effect of the oil industry on the cultural sites. When oil activities had not come to their side, people hardly fell sick and relied on their gods for protection and consultation. However, as oil workers came and destroyed their place of abode, the gods are no longer with them, leading to frequent deaths in villages and hospitalizations.

Outside the desecration of sacred places, one of the obvious social consequences of the oil and gas activities in the Ijo environment is the gradual disruption or abandonment of indigenous traditions, customs, and values. The operations of multinational oil companies in the area sometimes require the presence of different peoples from different cultural backgrounds with elements of western culture. The influx of oil workers with fat-wages has tremendously affected the customs and traditions of the Ijo people. A participant made this point in his assertion that the habit of women wearing trousers and skin-tight wears was frowned upon in the traditional Ijo society but the disdain has petered off today due to young girls' zeal to attract sexual attention from oil workers, who usually receive huge wages compared to earnings in the peasant economy.

Before the 1990s, Ijo communities in Ijoland were known for their cultural displays and festivals. However, the increasing awareness of oil activities and the resulting conflicts have inhibited communal cultural gathering in most oil-producing communities (Ukeje, 2001; Abejide, 2012). For example, Nembe, an Ijo community known for its cultural displays and festivals, has lost interest in these events. Traditional wake-keep, which was once organized at night to honor the dead, has become less prominent in some communities due to intermittent community crises, mostly oil-induced, creating general insecurity. This has led to the extinction of most festivals and the neglect of traditional wake-keeping practices.

The side effects of oil production are also manifest in the chieftaincy institution, with traditional rulers often living outside their domains to protect their personal estates. This has resulted in a breakdown of norms, increased social vices, and a decline in traditional values. One of the most visible social vices arising from oil companies is prostitution (Mai-Bornu, 2023). More so, the study found that when men who form about 100% of the labor force in the oil industry are sent to rural communities by oil prospecting companies, they use money to entice and seduce their victims, have accelerated the production of children outside wedlock, leading to abortions, premature deaths, and divorces among married women. Local traders construct temporary structures near flow stations and oil firms to provide shelter for sex-workers (Udong, 2011). Attesting to the link between the oil industry and the decline of social norms, an interviewee noted that the arrival of an oil prospecting company, Western Geophysical, in the Odioma area in the 1990s led to the construction of camps for prostitution and petty trading. Asawo village, adjacent to the Nembe creek flow station, has remained a camp for prostitutes until recently. In addition to the preceding, alcoholism and drug abuse have reached alarming levels in the Ijo communities. The surge of the oil industry has resulted in the influx of many immigrants who resort to unorthodox survival methods, including robbery and piracy. Some indigenes of Ijoland are also complicit in this. The presence of transnational petroleum exploration companies in Ijoland has also contributed to land disputes in the area. Different villages or families often lay claims of ownership when a parcel of land is marked for extraction of oil or oil facilities.

In summary, the increasing awareness of oil activities and the rise of oil-related conflicts in Ijoland have led to a decline in traditional values, social vices, and land disputes among Ijo communities. There has been a decline in respect for elderly and traditional leadership structures within communities. Youth restiveness has become a significant social consequence, with decrees and laws by the federal government contributing to this trend. Petroleum Decree 51 of 1969 granted exclusive ownership of oil resources to the federal government, while the offshore Oil Revenues Decree 9 of 1971 made it legal for the federal government to appropriate all minerals in the continental shelf of littoral states.

The National Water Authority Decree 13 of 1977 made all navigable waters the property of the federal government, with Ijo occupying about 70% of rivers in the Niger Delta. The land (Title vesting, etc) Decree also made the Niger Delta communities, including Ijoland, tenants of the Federal Government. Environmental degradation and the reluctance of oil/gas companies to pay fair and adequate compensations to victims of oil activities have also been linked to youth restiveness in the region. D.S.P Alamiyeseigha, former governor of Bayelsa State, mentioned 12 points as other causes of youth restiveness in the Niger Delta. These include long-standing marginalization of the Niger Delta, diabolical activities of oil and gas companies, improved educational levels of youths, lack of political will by past federal governments to enforce environmental laws, excessive use of weapons by security agencies during peace keeping, sponsorship of youths to cause spillage, falling standards of education due to lack of infrastructure, and the unemployment of Ijo youths after national service (Alamiyeseigha, 2004).

Oil companies have consistently refused to honor Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) entered into between them and their host communities, leading to social problems for youths concerned. They resort to employing problematic and strong "Standby Labour" workers, who are not permanent staff of the companies but have jobs to do, with some being paid between N20,000.00 (Twenty Thousand Naira) and N50,00.00 (Fifty Thousand Naira), which has serious social problems for youths concerned. Youth restiveness has caused significant damage to the socio-economic environment of the Ijo area, leading to vandalism of oil companies' assets, stopping of jobs, and disrespect. Within the communities, youth restiveness has been blamed for the near collapse of traditional leadership structures in Ijoland. Making this point, an interviewee asserted that in Nember (Ogbolomabiri), two political groups emerged seeking power and influence to seize control of access to community leadership and funds from oil companies. In 1998, prominent people in Nember (Bassambiri) were embarrassingly beaten by youths in their quest to control the oil money accruable to their community. This phenomenon of embarrassing behavior of the youths was pervasive to most Ijo communities.

Health Impacts of Oil Industry Activities on the Ijo People

During oil exploration, considerable damage is done to ecosystem. This is done through uncontrolled flaring of natural gas into the atmosphere; leakages of crude oil to the surroundings at the well sites and flow-stations; and massive spillage during preventive maintenance of the flow-station equipment. Also, oil blow-outs, damage to pipelines

resulting from vandalism, and leaks at the well sites and flow-stations as a result of malfunctioning valves cause human and material problems (Olali, 2023; Okotie, *et al.* 2018; Akani, *et al.* 2022; Feghabo, 2014)). The above cases are a common happening in the oil producing areas.

Crude oil is a mixture of hydrocarbons of various molecular weights with the organic compounds containing sulfur, nitrogen, and various trace metals. The lightest fraction of the crude oil is what is called natural gas, which comes out under pressure in association with crude oil from the oil wells. This is the flared part of crude oil, and it contains very volatile part of the petroleum (Akani, *et al.* 2022; Feghabo, 2014). Gas flaring has posed a lot of threats in the Ijo environment. It is said that from 1958 to 1999, more than 5.7 trillion cubic feet of associated gas had been produced of which about 5.0 trillion cubic feet or 88 percent of the total production was flared (Olali, 2023; Okotie, *et al.* 2018). Between 1990 and 2000, Nigeria was ranked first among gas flaring countries of the world, flaring 2.5 billion cubic feet (Okoko, *et a.* 2006). As from 2010, the country ranked ninth among countries with the highest proven gas reserves; and ranked second, after Russia, among countries that flare most of the associated gas, flaring 536 billion cubic feet (Anikpo *et al.* 2013). It is estimated that the country flared a volume of about 30 billion standard feet of gas in January 2011 alone (Anikpo *et al.* 2006). The Ijo environment has been exposed to gas flaring for some fifty years now. As would be expected, this exposure has caused a lot of harm to the physical and human environment, ranging from poor crop yield, corrosion of metallic property to human health.

The major composition of the flared natural gas is methane, ethane, and decreasing quantities of higher hydrocarbons and hydrogen sulfide. The primary products from the flared natural gas are carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, sulfur, and aldehydes and oxides of nitrogen (Anikpo, *et al.* 2006). Carbon monoxide (co) is released into the atmosphere when fossil fuels are burned and is known to impair nerves and the heart by reducing the oxygen carrying capacity of blood. In short, when carbon monoxide reacts with haemoglobin (the iron-containing protein in blood cells that is responsible for oxygen transportation in the blood) it causes headache, vomiting, coma and death (Okotie, *et al.* 2018). Sulfur dioxide, which results from the combustion of crude oil, accounts for a significant percentage of total sulfur dioxide produced in Nigeria. It is harmful to both humans and the environment. Furthermore, it can easily be oxidized to sulfur trioxide (So₃) by different pathways, such as reaction with oxygen, resulting in the production of sulfuric acid. Many of the environmental effects attributed to sulfur dioxide are actually due to the sulfuric acid. When nitrous and sulfur oxides from the gas flares mix with atmospheric moisture it results in the phenomenon of acid rain (Akani, *et al.* 2022).

Acid rain is a major factor in the destruction of most invertebrates and numerous micro-organisms in oil-producing environments across the country. It is well-documented that acid rain also affects plant physiology. Additionally, it is blamed for the acidification of water bodies and the death of plants. Acidic gases such as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen

oxides, by-products of crude oil combustion, are released from gas flares and undergo atmospheric oxidation. This process, accelerated by sunlight, leads to the formation of secondary pollutants, including sulfuric and nitric acids. When these acids dissolve in rainfall, fog, or dew, they precipitate and are deposited on vegetation, soil, and materials such as monuments, cultural artefacts, and building roofs. This deposition accelerates the degradation of the affected objects (Anikpo, *et al.*2013). Recent studies have shown that higher levels of sulfur aerosols are associated with increased sickness and mortality from lung disorder, such as asthma and bronchitis (Babatunde, 2010). Methane is one of the greenhouse gases described as the warming of the earth's atmosphere by a build-up of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide or other gases). It is said that the build-up of greenhouse gases allows the sun's rays to heat the earth, while making the infra-red radiation atmosphere opaque to infra-red radiation, thereby preventing a counter balancing loss of heat.

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is widely known to assist in plant photosynthesis. It also readily transmits energy from sun to earth and absorbs in the infra-red region. Increased carbon dioxide owing to open flares of many flow-stations, no doubt, offsets the CO₂ balance, contributing to a reduced heat radiated from earth to space, a phenomenon known as greenhouse effects. This contributes to the atmospheric temperature increase otherwise known as global warming. Rising global temperatures raise sea levels and change precipitation and other local climatic conditions (Babatunde, 2010). Consequently, changing regional climate alters forests, crop yields, and water supplies. It also threatens human health, and harms birds, fish, and many organisms in the ecosystem in the Ijo environment in particular and Niger Delta in general. On the other hand, Nitrogen oxides (by-products of burning hydrocarbon), formed in the high temperature region of the flare, cause not only eye and respiratory irritations, but also affect genes of all living creatures, and so lead to unpredictable mutations (Lloyd-Smith & Senjen, 2011; Amadi, 2014). Also, Hydrogen sulfur, which is among the many products of gas flare, is particularly very corrosive to metals in the presence of water.

The Positive Effects

As the above discourse shows, oil has had profound adverse implications for Ijoland and its people. It is worth noting, however, that the impacts are not entirely adverse. For example, oil companies' corporate social responsibility programmes usually centre on providing improvement in areas such as economic infrastructure, business development, environmental management, education, agriculture and social infrastructure (Babatunde, 2010). However, the early years of oil production and exploitation did not concurrently start with provisions of corporate social responsibility by the oil companies in their host communities. The onset of oil exploration and extraction from Ijo land was followed by neglect which resulted in three distinct phases of agitations, with an epoch of ambivalent corporate responsibility (from 1970 to 1990) coinciding with incipient community agitations. While, the last period 1990 - till date has been the era of increased community agitations/militancy and serious state command intervention in the Niger Delta development process (Okodudu, 2008).

In response to agitations against the adverse impacts of oil and check against disruptive activities, multinational oil companies adopted the practice of corporate social responsibility, through which they provide development assistance, in terms of finance and infrastructure to the Ijo people and the broader Niger Delta. Corporate social responsibilities have, on their part, undergone three distinct phases - community assistance (CA), Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and the Global Memorandum of Understanding (G-MoU) (Hoben, *et al.* 2012; Raimi, Nwoke, Boroh, 2016). Via the G-MoU, oil companies aggregate communities into clusters along either local government council or clan categories, provide seed money based on production figures for community development projects start up, and offer technical assistance and linkages with banks and partners for the initiation and implementation of developmental projects (Raimi, Nwoke, Boroh, 2016). The intent here has been to allow communities take ownership of such projects/ programmes. Via these efforts, oil producing Ijo communities have seen improved infrastructure such as water, electricity, school buildings, and clinics, among others. Scholarships have also been offered to some at various levels. However, these have not effectively counteracted the adverse implications of oil on the region and the attendant socio-economic and political impacts (Hoben, *et al.* 2012; Raimi, Nwoke, Boroh, 2016).

Conclusion

From the discourse thus far, it can be gleaned that oil wealth in Ijo land has led to a duality of outcomes. While it has facilitated infrastructural development and increased educational opportunities, it has also resulted in severe environmental degradation and social unrest that distorts the very fabric of Ijo identity. The findings underscore the importance of understanding these transformations as they relate to cultural preservation and community resilience. As the Ijo people navigate the complexities introduced by external economic pressures, it becomes crucial to recognize their agency in shaping their future. The study highlights the need for inclusive policies that respect traditional governance structures while addressing contemporary challenges. By fostering dialogue between the Ijo community, the Nigerian state, and multinational corporations, there is potential for a more equitable approach to resource management that honors the cultural heritage and aspirations of the Ijo people.

References

- Abejide, T. S. (2012). *Oil and the Ijaw People of the Niger Delta States: 1956 to 1998*, University of Johannesburg (South Africa).
- Adeyemo, O. K., Ubiogoro, O. E., & Adedeji, O. B. (2009). Oil exploitation, fisheries resources and sustainable livelihood in the Niger delta, Nigeria. *Nature and Faune*, 24(1), 56-61.
- Akagbue, B. O., Popoola, T. O., Nenger, J. A., & Babatunde, S. (2024). Negative health and environmental effects of oil exploitation in Southern Ijaw, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. *European Journal of Environment and Earth Sciences*, 5(3), 34-41.
- Akani, G. C., Amuzie, C. C., Alawa, G. N., Nioking, A., & Belema, R. (2022). *Factors militating against biodiversity conservation in the Niger Delta, Nigeria: The way out*. In *Biodiversity in Africa: Potentials, Threats and Conservation* (pp. 573-600). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Alagoa, E. J., & Clark, J. P. (Eds.). (2009). *The Izon of the Niger Delta*. African books collective.
- Alamieyeseigha, D. S. P. (2004). The Niger Delta & youth restiveness: The way forward, *The News*. 23(15). 49.
- Ama-Ogbari, O. C. (2009). *Introduction to the economic history of The Niger Delta*, Port-Harcourt: Metroprints Limited
- Anikpo, M., Ibaba, I., Peterside, S., Onyido, O., Nyulaku, P., Ekiye, J., & Kpodo, S. (2013). *The Nigerian State and gas flaring in the Niger Delta*, A Nacgoni Research Project), Maiden Edition, Nigeria.
- Ariye, E. C. (2013). The Ijo (Ijaw) people of Delta state: Their early history and aspects of social and cultural practices. *Historical Research Letter*, 8.
- Babatunde, A. (2010). Environmental conflict and the politics of oil in the oil-bearing areas of Nigeria's Niger Delta, *Peace and Conflict Review*, 5(1), 1-13.
- Ekpo, U. (2009) *The Niger Delta and oil politics.*, Lagos: International Energy communications Ltd.
- Feghabo, C. C. (2014). *Alienation and Ecoactivism in Selected Works on the Niger Delta Crisis* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Hoben, M., Kovick, D., Plumb, D., & Wright, J. (2012). *Corporate and community engagement in the Niger Delta: Lessons learned from Chevron Nigeria Limited's GMOU process*. Washington, DC: Consensus Building Institute.

- Ikporukpo, C. O. (2011). *Debating petroleum and environmental justice in the Niger Delta, Nigeria Stakeholders perspective, Centecs Monograph Series, No1.*
- Kimse Okoko et al. (2006). *The politics of oil and the development of underdevelopment in the Niger Delta*, Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 2006, 86.
- Lloyd-Smith, M., & Senjen, R. (2011). *Hydraulic fracturing in coal seam gas mining: the risks to our health, communities, environment and climate* (37), Bangalow, NSW: National Toxics Network.
- Mai-Bornu, Z. L. (2023). The oil extractive industry in The Niger Delta: Impacts on the livelihoods of women, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies, An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 15(1), 91-105.
- Obi, C. I. (2001). *The changing forms of identity politics in Nigeria under economic adjustment: The case of the oil minorities movement of the Niger Delta* (No. 119), Nordic Africa Institute.
- Okaba, B. (2013). *Cultural institutions. In Ebiegberi Joe Alagow (ed), The land and people of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta*, Port-Harcourt: Onyonma Research Publications.
- Okaba, B. O. (2005). *Petroleum industry and the paradox of rural poverty in the Niger Delta*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation
- Okodudu, S. A. (2008). *Corporate social responsibility policy and crisis in the Nigeria Delta: An appraisal of SPDC global memorandum of understanding*, University of Port Harcourt.
- Okotie, S., Ogbarode, N. O., & Ikporo, B. (2018). *The oil and gas industry and the Nigerian environment: In The political ecology of oil and gas activities in the Nigerian aquatic ecosystem* (47-69). Academic Press.
- Olali, S. T. (2023). THE ijaw in the 21st century: Experiences from the historic past and imperatives for Bayelsa state, *Academica: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 13(3), 62-82.
- Raimi, B. L., Nwoke, N., & Boroh, S. E. (2016). How democratic is community driven development? A focus on SPDC global memorandum of understanding (GMoU) in the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria, *International Journal of Development and Management Review*, 11(1), 67-79.
- Sakaeva, M. (2022). Rivers through the Prism of Oil Spills: Native voices from the Russian Arctic, In *cold Waters: Tangible and Symbolic Seascapes of the North* (19-33). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Udong, E. (2011). *The quest for sustainable livelihoods: Women fish traders in Ibaka, Niger Delta, Nigeria*, Wageningen University and Research.

Ukeje, C. (2001). Oil communities and political violence: The case of ethnic Ijaws in Nigeria's Delta region. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13(4), 15-36.

Ukeje, C., & Adebani, W. (2008). Ethno-nationalist claims in southern Nigeria: Insights from Yoruba and Ijaw nationalisms since the 1990s, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(3), 563-591.

Utuama, T. (2010). *Youth restiveness and education: A sociological study of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Lagos (Nigeria)).

Williamson, K. (1970). Some food plant names in the Niger Delta, *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 36(2), 156-167.